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First Great Western

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Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[Mr. Michael Foster.]

🕒 9.30am

Mr. Edward Vaizey >

(Wantage) (Con)

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This is the first time that I have spoken under your chairmanship, Mr. Atkinson, and I look forward to being guided by you throughout the debate.

The debate is about First Great Western commuter services. I shall speak specifically about the services that run from Didcot Parkway railway station in my constituency, but I shall also make some remarks on behalf of other hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) and the hon. Members for Reading, West (Martin Salter) and for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), none of whom can be here. I also present apologies on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson), who had hoped to speak in the debate but is currently stuck on a First Great Western train between Reading and Paddington. If the debate was interactive, no doubt we could receive BlackBerry text messages from him, updating us on the service.

Didcot Parkway dominates the town of Didcot. It is the reason, pretty much, for the existence of Didcot, and every day it takes thousands of passengers to London as well as taking passengers to Swindon and Bristol. In December 2005, First Great Western re-won the rail franchise for a further seven years, with the opportunity to extend it for another three. Many colleagues, from all parties, were pleased with that result. We had no reason to doubt that First Great Western would provide a good service, and many of us—*[Laughter.]* That is my first remark on behalf of the hon. Member for Reading, West.

Mrs. Theresa May >

(Maidenhead) (Con)

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I apologise to hon. Members, including the Minister, because I shall not be able to stay for the whole debate, but I did introduce an Adjournment debate last week on this issue. Some of us were very concerned when First Great Western was given the whole franchise, not simply because it was First Great Western, but because we were concerned that the concept of merging a commuter franchise with a long-distance franchise meant that commuter services would lose out, and I am sure that that is exactly what has happened.

Mr. Vaizey >

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I certainly appreciate my right hon. Friend's point. I know that, in her constituency, the loss of the separate franchise held by Thames Trains has had a very bad effect. Speaking personally, however, I had no problem with First Great Western winning the franchise at the time.

Peter Luff >

(Mid-Worcestershire) (Con)

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I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, particularly as, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, I cannot stay for the whole debate, because of Select Committee business. I had hoped to be able to pour praise on the Minister for the announcement that he made about the potential redoubling of the Cotswold line, which could solve many of the problems in Worcestershire. I should like to express my gratitude to him at length, but I cannot do that. However, I have severe reservations about the management ability of First Great Western and, in particular, about its management of the franchise that we are debating. Repeatedly, its service between Worcestershire and London has descended into chaos, and that is true again now. The problems include very long delays, the wrong rolling stock and a timetable that does not enable my constituents, for example, to commute back to Worcester. I do not think that the company is up to the job.

Mr. Vaizey >

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I am coming to that point. I was speaking about my feelings 18 months ago. They have changed, I can assure hon. Members. At the time, the then Secretary of State for Transport, who is now the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, shared my optimism. He wrote to me to say that

“passengers will benefit from a major increase in peak-period capacity into and out of London Paddington and a commitment to improve performance and reliability”.

He told Parliament that on both franchises the contracts would

“deliver...an improved service for passengers.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons, 13 December 2005; Vol. 440, c. 142WS.*]

At the time, First Great Western wrote to me, in memorable words:

“We have the experience, drive and proven track record to transform travel and we look forward to setting new standards for customer service, creating the benchmark by which all rail travel is judged”.

It has certainly done that, but not in the way it intended.

Mr. Dan Rogerson >

(North Cornwall) (LD)



I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. If First Great Western is the benchmark by which other rail companies will be judged, I am sure that it is very pleased with that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, particularly on longer services, such as those from my area of Cornwall, customers find that refreshment services that are advertised are in fact not available for large parts of the journey? That is a particular inconvenience and could be a problem for many travellers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that issue ought to be addressed by the company?

Mr. Vaizey >

That is absolutely the case. I understand that First Great Western is now also laying off some travelling chefs, and of course the trolley on commuter services is complete fiction because, as passengers are packed in like sardines, it would take a Houdini to get the trolley from one end of the train to the other.

First Great Western did carry out a consultation on the proposed new timetable that was to come into force in December 2006. The company heard from 9,500 separate correspondents, but one has to question whether it listened to a single one. One correspondent—me—wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport and to First Great Western on 5 September saying that

“one can see I think quite a big reduction in service during the peak commuting time around 0730. Between 0717 and 0748, there are currently 5 fast trains. In December there will effectively be only one. I can assure you this will lead to serious overcrowding, and would really urge you to try and insert an additional 2 fast services at this time”.

At the time, consulting only the timetable, I was blissfully unaware that shorter trains were also about to be brought into service. I met the head of First Great Western and the then Minister responsible for rail, who is now the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg). We saved one train, the 05.46, but nothing else was changed.

Mrs. Siân C. James >

(Swansea, East) (Lab)



I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Will he join me in condemning the decision made by First Great Western to terminate the important 15.15 service between London Paddington and Swansea at Cardiff? Unlike its fellow Welsh operators, which are doing exceptionally well, First Great Western is at the bottom of the pile. The company has had to reverse a number of timetable decisions on services in England. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it should now do the same for Welsh customers?

Mr. Vaizey >

I could not agree more. Since introducing the new timetable in December 2006, First Great Western has set

“new standards for customer service”

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and created a new, very low benchmark by which all rail travel can be judged. To put it bluntly, since the introduction of the new timetable, commuters in my constituency using Didcot Parkway have received an abominable service. They have suffered a quadruple whammy. First, the new timetable means that there are fewer fast trains in the morning or evening. Secondly, the replacement of high-speed trains with Adelantes means that most trains arriving at Didcot are already full to the brim. Most commuters cannot get on at Didcot. If they do manage to get on, they are packed like sardines. I understand from the newspapers that the Office of Rail Regulation says that that is the safest way to travel now. Some people are even being forced to stand three to a lavatory. Thirdly, and to make matters even worse, it is now routine—a daily occurrence—for trains to be delayed or cancelled, and fourthly, to add insult to injury, all that has happened at the same time as massive fare increases and huge hikes in parking charges.

I shall give just a few specifics. There is now no train at all from Didcot to Paddington between 07.07 and 07.30. Seating capacity has been massively reduced. Some estimates are that it has fallen from 1,800 seats to just 600 at peak times. Two fast evening services from Paddington to Didcot have gone. There is barely a service between Oxford and Didcot in the morning now, and it is almost impossible to connect to any train leaving Didcot going west. For those travelling from Didcot to Swindon in the morning, the service is completely surreal. People get on the 07.41 and then have to wait at Swindon for 40 minutes to catch the 08.50. They therefore arrive at work late. If someone wants to get from Didcot to Bristol in time for work, they have to get the 06.24. A first-class season ticket now costs £6,800 a year; there has been a 15 per cent. increase this year. A second-class season ticket—now known by passengers as a “standing-class” ticket—now costs £3,800 and the price is due to rise to £4,250. Car park charges have risen by 60 per cent.

I have been an MP only for a short time, but I can assure you, Mr. Atkinson, that there are many important issues in my constituency. However, this issue has far exceeded any that I have come across. The very large bundle of papers that I am holding up represents the number of e-mails that I have received since the new timetable was introduced. It would be hard for me to exaggerate the enormous chaos that that is causing.

Mrs. May >

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My hon. Friend is extremely generous with his time. I have received more than 600 e-mails from my constituents about this issue. At Paddington last night, I saw the FGW strapline, “Transforming Travel”. It has indeed, for my constituents, transformed a good, reliable service with a good choice of fast and semi-fast trains for commuting to London into a very, very bad service, with a significant reduction in the number of trains available, and overcrowding. Does my hon. Friend agree that for commuters from the Thames valley, what is crucial is increasing the number of fast and semi-fast services into Paddington so that the overcrowding can be reduced and our constituents can have a decent service to get into London?

Mr. Vaizey >

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My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. She represents her constituents, and the anger that we heard in her voice represents the anger felt by so many of them. Indeed, we need to increase not only the number of services, but the length of the trains. Quite a few commuters are returning to

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the car, which is not something that those of us who care about the environment want to see. Even worse, some commuters are honestly thinking of giving up their jobs, while others are even being told by their bosses that it might be better to leave.

Let me give just a flavour of some of the remarks that have been made to me over the past month. One commuter said:

“I have been commuting from Didcot for nearly 20 years—I have never been so angry that I have been forced to complain to my MP”.

Another commented:

“It feels as though commuters are being punished/taxed for using the railways”.

Another said:

“It pains me to send an email to you for the first time in my ten year commuting career. The first two weeks of 2007 have been so appalling that I feel compelled to write to you”.

And so the comments go on.

Let me describe a typical week in the life of a commuter from Didcot. On Monday, the 7.19 was cancelled, the 7.30—the new train that First Great Western had trumpeted—was cancelled, the 7.36 was delayed until 7.54 and so it goes on. I came into the office yesterday to find a dozen e-mails from people who had seen the new 7:30 train, which was supposed to help my constituents, come into Didcot, slow down and then carry on without stopping. That was apparently because of driver diagram error, which is a new one on me. First Great Western has been fatally damaged by this chaos, and commuters now refer to it as Last Great Western or Forever Getting Worse. I suspect that there are plenty of other names, but they may be too rude for a family audience such as the one that we have with us today.

As I said at the beginning, I hope that hon. Members will indulge me while I briefly make some points on behalf of hon. Members who cannot be here. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witney wrote to me to say:

“It is clear that the punctuality of the service has deteriorated, and overcrowding has reached unacceptable levels.”

Perhaps the Minister can confirm in his reply that serious efforts will be made in the short term to achieve a marked improvement in First Great Western’s performance along the Cotswold line and that there is a real prospect of redoubling the line in the medium term.

The hon. Member for Reading, West, who, as I said earlier, was optimistic about the First Great Western franchise, wrote to the chief executive to say that he had

“lost the confidence of myself and the travelling public”.

In his letter, he raises many of the complaints that I have raised, but he also refers specifically to his concern that late-night trains no longer stop at Reading. The last train stops there at 10.30, and there has also been a reduction in the number of fast and semi-fast trains serving Tilehurst, Reading and Pangbourne.

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In her note to me, the hon. Member for Slough highlighted similar issues—a reduction in service, overcrowding and worsening reliability. She says that local firms are suffering and quotes many of the e-mails from her constituents, who use phrases such as

“I am nearly at breaking point”.

She concludes by saying that

“people are paying more to get less”.

Let me return to my specific concerns about Didcot. At a time when Didcot has been designated a growth point in the south-east, when thousands of new houses are planned for Didcot and nearby Grove and when the Government say that they are committed to public transport and to getting people out of their cars, the present situation is completely and totally unacceptable. I repeat: the situation is completely and totally unacceptable, and it must be sorted out.

The great difficulty, of course, is that each side blames the other. Not to put too fine a point on it—I hope that I am not telling tales out of school—First Great Western blames the Government. It wrote to me, saying:

“the new timetable was based on the timetable specified in the Greater Western franchise bid...any timetable has to meet both Network Rail and Department for Transport specifications”.

The Government responded on 2 November. They wrote to me, saying:

“In relation to the timetable due to commence this December...I consider a reasonable balance has been struck in the level and structure of provision of train services from Didcot Parkway”.

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If I were in a mischievous mood, I would put those words on a large billboard outside the Didcot Parkway station, but I would probably be responsible for starting a riot, so I will not.

In all my negotiations with First Great Western and my attempts to bring colleagues from all parties together to meet the company and sort the situation out, I have tried to avoid partisanship. However, the more I look into the situation, the more concerned I am about the effect of the Railways Act 2005, which gave the Government the power to set the timetable. Some of the current problems are the result of botched nationalisation, rather than botched privatisation, which is often the charge that Ministers make against any Conservative who takes issue with the state of the railways. I should remind hon. Members, however, that the Government have been in charge of the privatised railways five times longer than the previous Conservative Government.

In the past few days, the *Evening Standard* has run an important campaign on the issue. It has focused mainly on overcrowding, but it could have focused on a host of other issues, although there would have been no room in the newspaper for any other news. I was particularly taken by an article in yesterday's edition by Christian Wolmar, the well-known transport journalist. He says, I am afraid, that

“most of the blame lies squarely with the Department for Transport and its ministers, who have been attempting to micro-manage the contract from 100 miles away...the buck stops with the Transport Secretary”.

Having had my partisan outing, I want to look ahead to see what can be done to solve the problems for my constituents and those of the dozens of hon. Members present. First, the Minister must accept responsibility for the way in which the franchise was tendered. Transport 2000, the well-known transport lobbying group, told me:

“the Government imposed a timetable and train leasing framework which involved fewer trains”.

I hope that the Minister notes the use of the word “imposed”. It is plainly silly for the Department to try to micro-manage such franchises, because they only end up taking the blame.

It is also bizarre that the specification of the timetable is kept confidential for commercial reasons when it is put out to tender. Presumably, all the train companies tendering for the specification see it, so there could be no issue of commercial confidentiality between them. It would be extremely helpful if members of the travelling public, most of whom know a great deal about the railway that they use every day, had a chance to see the tender and comment on how realistic it was.

What needs to change? First, obviously, I would like more train services. I would like to go back to the timetable before December 2006; it was not perfect, but people knew and understood it. I do not know whether, in asking for that, I am asking the Minister to wave a magic wand, but my commuters want that timetable. Secondly, the Minister must answer the charge that 32 rail carriages have been withdrawn from service at the Department’s behest. We want those carriages put back into service.

Peter Luff >

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I hope that the Minister will address that point when he winds up. The root of the problem could be the attempt, certainly on the Cotswold line, to run a more intensive railway service with fewer carriages. That leads to the frequent cancellation of services and to services running with inappropriate rolling stock. It is clearly ludicrous to go back to Thames Turbos and a journey of two and a half hours between Worcester and London.

Mr. Vaizey >

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My hon. Friend makes a good point, but let me turn my fire back to First Great Western. A major contributory factor to the present situation has clearly been the extraordinary backlog of maintenance. I have no idea what is going on behind the scenes, but it is very bad. There seems to be enormous disaffection among First Great Western’s train drivers and crew, and the company really needs to get a grip on that. I am happy to concede that that is not something for which the Government can take responsibility.

Matthew Taylor >

(Truro and St. Austell) (LD)

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On that last point, the hon. Gentleman rightly says that the buck stops with the Minister, and that is also true as regards the management of First Great Western. The Government have a real influence over the company, but there is no doubt that it has been cutting every corner that it can now that it has the franchise—it is there to make a fast buck. It is deliberately understaffing catering and claiming that crews have not turned up, when, in fact, they have not been employed in the first place. The company is also about to replace the Travelling Chef operation

with a massively more expensive alternative that will not actually cater for people. Furthermore, it has withdrawn the breakfast service on the early-morning train from Cornwall: it is a bit hard to think of a train that needs that service more, given that the journey takes commuters five or six hours. The Minister can have a direct influence on all that, because he, unlike the rest of us, is uniquely able to influence the rules under which the company must operate.

Mr. Vaizey >

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I take that point. I was trying to be even-handed in my criticism, but some hon. Members want to hold the Government to account on this, and I appreciate where they are coming from.

Mr. Richard Benyon >

(Newbury) (Con)

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Cornwall.

Mr. Vaizey >

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They come from Cornwall, as well.

In the long term Network Rail has an incredibly important role to play in upgrading signalling, but also specifically in upgrading Reading, where I believe there is a £250 million proposal on the table. My experience of Network Rail has not been wholly wonderful. Milton Park, the business park next to Didcot, has proposed to pay for a new bridge into the business park over the railway line. Network Rail has not taken up that offer, which would not cost it a penny. It has been extremely dilatory, as far as Reading borough council is concerned, about working out what to do about Reading station. I hope that it will pull its finger out.

As I hope my opening remarks and other hon. Members' interventions have shown, the situation as it stands is completely chaotic. In my view, the blame game should be played only so as to work out who is responsible for fixing the problem. Nine or 10 MPs of all political parties met me and First Great Western representatives 10 days ago, and we have all written to the Secretary of State and requested one crucial meeting. I hope that hon. Members who did not sign that letter but who are present for the debate will join as signatories to it. The idea is to sit down with representatives of First Great Western, the Government and Network Rail for an hour, half a day or a day—as long as it takes—to try to sort the problem out. The real frustration for Members of Parliament, where this is a constituency issue, is that whoever we meet will blame the other side. Until we have them all in a room together, telling us what is going on and what is possible, we cannot do our job as Members of Parliament, by going back to our constituents to tell them what can be changed and how we can help.

Several hon. Members

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rose—

Mr. Peter Atkinson >

(in the Chair)

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Order. A considerable number of hon. Members want to contribute to the debate and the wind-ups should start at about 10.30, so I ask hon. Members to be brief; otherwise some will not get to speak.

🕒 9.52am

Mr. Andrew Smith >

(Oxford, East) (Lab)

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The First Great Western timetable changes were a complete shambles, and very damaging for commuters from Oxford. I congratulate my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey), on securing the debate. As you said, Mr. Atkinson, many hon. Members want to speak, so I shall keep my remarks brief.

My first point is that First Great Western and the Department for Transport need to learn the lessons of this fiasco. Thanks to the very swift and loud reaction from people commuting from Oxford, with their petition and complaints through the media, MPs and councillors, First Great Western moved quite quickly to change the new timetable, reinstating and amending a number of services from Monday last week. That was a welcome victory for the campaign. However, if the company were really in touch with and responding to its customers' needs, the difficulty would never have happened in the first place.

Secondly, that is not to say that services from Oxford are now perfect: far from it. According to Ox Rail Action, the changes mean that local travellers have gone from losing 80 per cent. of their seats from Oxford in the morning peak to losing 20 per cent. The hon. Member for Wantage has already made the point about connections to Didcot and services going west, which is also important.

Thirdly, there is a need for thorough, continuing monitoring of the adequacy of provision, coupled with consultation with and representation of passengers, including, as we have heard, on the matter of the future of the franchise. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will press First Great Western in no uncertain terms on this matter, as I have, and as I know other colleagues here this morning have. I hope that he will give us a commitment to ensure that the monitoring of services and their capacity will be made public, and that he will insist on proper consultation procedures, not just in the immediate aftermath of this row, when it is all in the headlines, but on a continuing basis.

Fourthly, capacity, overcrowding and the type of carriages that are used are a crucial aspect of the problem. One of the main complaints that I have received, after the sheer inadequacy of the new timetable that was initially proposed, was about the number of people having to stand, day after day. Standing is not acceptable on those services. People pay a lot of money for their season tickets, and they are entitled to a reasonable standard of comfort, and the opportunity to get on with some work or reading.

It is important to get those things right, and to assure people that the passengers' voice will be heard. Everyone is mindful that there is due to be another timetable revision in December, and after what has just happened it is easy to understand why people fear the worst. The Thames valley services affect just about the most dynamic part of the UK economy; poor rail services have a very adverse impact on it.

 [Column 459WH](#)

Mr. Boris Johnson >

(Henley) (Con)



Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it makes no sense for First Great Western to alleviate overcrowding at one point on the line, such as Henley, by instructing that trains should not stop at another point—viz. Goring? Instead of robbing Peter to pay Paul it should lay on more services.

Mr. Smith >

I absolutely agree. It is in the nature of a network and efficient commuter services—and, for that matter, efficient long-distance services—that everything is integrated and we should have a comprehensively acceptable standard of provision, rather than just shifting the problem from one place to another.

It is clear that First Great Western has lost public confidence and we need to hear from the Minister that he will insist that the quality of services and any changes to the timetable and capacity in future will put passengers' needs first, and that his Department will be dedicated to making sure that that happens.

I would like to close by congratulating Oxford rail users and the Ox Rail Action group for the effective campaign that they have mounted. If one good thing has come out of all of this it is that there is now an organised and well supported group putting the passengers' case. It had better be listened to, and I shall certainly join the hon. Member for Wantage and other hon. Members in taking the case to the Secretary of State.

 9.57am**Sandra Gidley** >

(Romsey) (LD)



I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on securing the debate. I too applied for a debate on the subject and was unlucky, but the number of hon. Members here today demonstrates the strength of feeling. I thought that I had a large postbag, but clearly problems with the First Great Western franchise are much greater elsewhere.

The tale is one of unremitting misery. In my constituency First Great Western took over the old Wessex Trains franchise, which broadly covers the journey from Southampton to Bristol and sometimes Cardiff via Bath and Salisbury. The first sign of problems, as the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) hinted, was the draft timetable. At that stage the timetable was drawn up so that if one were a commuter living in a village who worked either in Salisbury or Southampton it would be necessary to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning to catch a very early train from Dean, Dunbridge or Mottisfont. It would also be necessary to stay at work for quite a long time, because, depending on where the person lived and worked, they might not be able to get back until 7 in the evening. Understandably many people were rather unhappy at being forced to stay at their workplace longer than necessary. However, the problem was worse than that because the times of trains from the villages to Salisbury, which were relied on by quite a few schoolchildren, were changed such that they would all arrive at school late.

 [Column 460WH](#)

Those concerns were raised with the Minister's predecessor and the timetable was improved slightly, but I had the feeling then that the train franchise company had proposed the worst possible scenario, so that any small improvement could be regarded as evidence of the company listening. I do not like to think that it was that cynical. Clearly we still have a substandard service, although it is better than the one that was originally proposed. The big problem is the number of peak-time trains that were cut. Although the overall reduction in seats is only about 20 per cent., there is a 50 to 60 per cent. reduction at peak times, which is causing great problems.

Also raised with the Minister at that time were concerns that the trains in the reduced service were to be reduced from three carriages to two. That seemed particularly perverse because, only a few years before, Wessex Trains had received permission to put on extra carriages because of the demand on the line. Again, we are not learning from the lessons of the past when designing new franchises. I support entirely the call for the draft timetable to be available for public scrutiny.

The public have reacted in droves. I want to give other hon. Members the chance to speak, so I shall simply highlight what is happening by giving some typical quotes from my constituents. A few people have asked why the franchise was given to a company that admitted in writing that it did not have enough carriages to run the service. That is still the case after 12 months. Many people are concerned about fares. A number of people have been caught out by fare increases and the change in the fare structure. One constituent said:

"On the first day that the service was run by First Great Western, my fare went up as they cancelled the 'super saver' ticket I had always used."

Constituents also say that overcrowding is a problem. One said:

"I have a photo of 60 people standing on a one-carriage train all the way to Bristol because the previous train had not turned up."

Another problem with the franchise is its unreliability. Over the Christmas period in particular, a large number of trains were cancelled, simply did not arrive, or were terminated short of the expected destination.

The changes to the timetable are somewhat perverse. Many of my constituents who travel from Romsey or Southampton to Cardiff sometimes have to change trains at Bristol Temple Meads. On some services, they no longer have seven minutes to change trains because the interval between the services has been changed to three minutes. I know that we are trying to encourage the public to be healthy, but one gentleman told me about an occasion when he had to make such a connection, saying:

"I had to run down the stairs, under the tracks and up the other side to just make it as the doors closed. Anyone not fit would never have made it."

Clearly, some common sense has to be used when the services are designed.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the problems with maintenance and the lack of rolling stock, which is something of a mystery because there seem to be carriages available. There are quite a few sitting in warm storage—I do not quite understand what that means—at Eastleigh depot, waiting to be used. I gather that there are other carriages at other depots. It has been

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suggested that they have been put to one side because First Great Western is struggling to meet the repayment terms of the franchise. A huge amount of money was offered for that franchise, and many people thought that the Government were benefiting at the expense of the commuter. Sadly, that seems to have been the case.

🕒 10.03am

Kerry McCarthy >

(Bristol, East) (Lab)

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I, too, shall be brief, as other hon. Members want to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on securing the debate.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, there was a protest on Monday in the Bristol area by commuters coming in from Bath and Somerset in which members of a campaign group called More Train, Less Strain handed out fake tickets to commuters. It is telling that First Great Western chose not to challenge the people who used the fake tickets because they realised how much uproar it would cause. The headline in the Bristol *Evening Post* the next day read, “Fake tickets, real anger”, which just about sums it up. There is real anger among commuters in the Bristol area about what has happened to their rail services since the December timetable was introduced. That anger drove people to stand on a railway platform at 6.30 am in the cold and dark to hand out fake tickets because they simply did not know what else to do. They ran the risk of prosecution, a £1,000 fine or imprisonment because they have reached breaking point.

The service has been appallingly unreliable since the new timetable was introduced, with delays, cancellations, short formations and overcrowding. Some of those problems were there before, but whenever I speak to First Great Western it says that they are due to maintenance problems. A new depot in my constituency at St. Philip’s Marsh is supposedly about to open, but I am told by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers that it still looks like a building site. We seem to be given one excuse after another.

Mr. David Drew >

(Stroud) (Lab/Co-op)

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I thank my hon. Friend and apologise for my lateness. I would have liked to speak in the debate, but the train was an hour late thanks to First Great Western, which is absolutely typical.

I have a question on the issue that my hon. Friend raises, and I disclose my interest with the RMT. There are contractual difficulties with First Great Western that need to be sorted out, but the issue that seems to be of greatest dispute with the Government is that of how many sets the company is able to run. It would be useful to know whose figures are correct, because there are significant differences between what used to run on those lines and what now runs. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Kerry McCarthy >

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I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was about to come to that point. We had a problem in getting our heads around the issue because of what happened in the Bristol area in the 48 hours before the new timetable was introduced. The trains there had been cut, but suddenly—

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almost overnight—their number increased from 51 to 57 to 60, and then in December extra trains were brought in. I believe that another eight trains were borrowed on Monday from the TransPennine franchise to deal with the protest.

There is also a problem with the short formation of trains. I have been told, anecdotally, that there is a huge amount of rolling stock sitting on the sidings that could be brought into service. We need to get to the bottom of how many trains the company has access to, how much it is prepared to invest in its rolling stock and what service it can run on that basis.

The short formation of trains and the problems caused by cancellations seem to be the main issues affecting Bristol commuters, some of whom have to stand all the way to work. I accept that some people might have to stand on short journeys, but some of them are having to stand for significantly longer periods. Many people cannot even get on to the trains. Sometimes, when a train has been cancelled, eight carriages-worth of commuters—in the past, there would have been two four-carriage trains—are trying to squeeze on to a two-carriage unit, so many people are left standing on the platform. Those people rely on trains to get them to and from work every morning and evening from Monday to Friday every week; their jobs depend on it. However, they miss important meetings, they cannot pick their children up from school because they have to stay late at work, and they lose performance bonuses. To add insult to injury, they are also being asked to pay more for the service.

First Great Western owes the travelling public an explanation of why the problems are being allowed to happen. There is clearly management failure. They seem to be dealing with matters on a firefighting basis: whoever shouts the loudest suddenly gets the temporary improvement in their service. A couple of weeks ago we were told that several branch lines in Cornwall were being closed so that we could have extra trains in the Bristol area. That is good news for me as a Bristol MP, but I imagine that it is not quite so attractive to people in the Cornwall area.

After my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) intervened, I mentioned that we have had some additional units. We want confirmation from First Great Western that those units are here to stay and that the improvement is to be permanent. We also need to know that the company is going to do more to improve the service. It may be that the franchise agreement simply is not deliverable on the current specification, but when First Great Western bid for it, it knew what it was getting into. There has been significant investment in our rail services in the past few years. First Great Western went into the franchise on the promise that it could run a decent service for commuters. If it is really saying that it cannot deliver that, it is time for it to put its hands up and say so to the public and to let someone who can run the service take over.

 [Column 463WH](#)

 10.09am

Mr. Richard Benyon >

(Newbury) (Con)

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I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on securing the debate, and I apologise to the Minister and other hon. Members for being unable to stay until the end.

In the spirit of fairness, before I say what I want to say about First Great Western, I must point out that it had to make its bid against the background of a very prescribed timetable. I know that, because when the draft timetable was published a year ago, an enormous campaign began in

my area of west Berkshire, which resulted in two meetings with the Minister's predecessor and the Secretary of State. The travelling public wrote an enormous number of letters and a petition was presented to Parliament. The result was the reversal of a large number of the proposed cuts to rail services in west Berkshire. I was able to write to the Secretary of State and the Minister to thank them for their intervention. My hon. Friend's point about our top-down and micro-managed rail service is right, but that is the end of any diversion of blame that I wish to share with the House today.

The problems that concern my constituents started on 11 December with the introduction of the new timetable. At the meeting that my hon. Friend mentioned, which took place a few yards from the Chamber last week, First Great Western's representatives said that the same number of trains is operating throughout the franchise area now as was operating before 11 December. I wrote those words down to ensure that I remembered them correctly. If they are correct, where have all the trains gone?

The hon. Members for Bristol, East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) referred to rolling stock that is piled up in depots. Our understanding from the meeting is that it is waiting to be fitted with the automatic train protection system, and that the timetable problems are unrelated to that stock. What has happened is that some bright spark—I say that with bitter irony—in First Great Western has decided to remove turbo trains from the two main commuter services leaving Newbury in the morning, and reduce the number of seats from 550 to about 280, by introducing those beastly Adelante trains. And the sooner we see the back of them the better.

What is happening to the travelling public in places such as west Berkshire? Increased travel times have a dramatic social effect, which we must not understate. Children see less of their parents and communities see less activity because people come home so late and so exhausted that they do not want to go out and run the kids' soccer club. The problems have much wider impact on society in general, not just on the travelling public, but commuters face increased inconvenience and have to change trains more often to get home on time, all at a time of inflation-busting fare increases.

 [Column 464WH](#)

Mr. Rob Wilson >

(Reading, East) (Con)

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On the point about timetables and inconvenience, may I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the effect of the timetable changes that were made late in the day on my constituents who attend Henley college? The timetable was changed literally a few days before the college was due to start its new term, meaning that students could not connect to Henley in time for their lessons. The college had to redraw its timetable from scratch within a few days to deal with those students.

Mr. Benyon >

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It is a familiar story, and I have heard of similar experiences: schoolchildren from places such as Kintbury cannot now reach school on time if they travel by train, so they are either late or their parents drive them. I hope that when the Minister responds, he takes up my hon. Friend's point. The net effect is more people on the road. I have commuters saying in droves that they are not prepared to put up with the problems and would prefer to sit in a traffic jam for two hours or get their child to school on time than to travel by train. It is a serious worry.

I shall quote one example of my earlier point. Sarah Akass is not a commuter, but her partner is. In one of the many hundreds of e-mails that I have received, she says that her partner,

“Alec now has a horrendous commute—is irritable, frustrated, spends time each day complaining to FGW (instead of doing his job and performing as he should be), we have less time at home together—and on numerous occasions caused by FGW I have to take the 1 hour round trip to Reading to pick him up... This is not sustainable”.

That is from just one of the many e-mails and letters that I have received on the subject.

I have written about the problem of overcrowding to the Office of Rail Regulation and to the Health and Safety Executive following our meeting last week. I have yet to hear from either organisation, but according to press reports it seems that, bizarrely, there are rules governing the overcrowding of cattle, sheep and pigs during transportation, but none regarding the transportation of people. In fact, the bizarre assertion has been made that in some way it is safer if people stand shoulder to shoulder rather than travel in a looser, seated arrangement. What a ridiculous statement. What a ridiculous state of affairs. The Office of Rail Regulation, the Department, the train operator and the HSE must examine it as a matter of urgency.

Finally, there is a problem of punctuality. Before the timetable change 99 per cent. of the two key morning commuter services that left from Newbury and Bedwyn were on time. Now that the services are dependent on trains that travel from the west country, 99 per cent. of them are late. That situation, when added to greater overcrowding, greater inconvenience and inflation-busting fare increases, is totally unacceptable.

I have written to the Minister asking him to examine the penalty clauses in the franchise document to see whether First Great Western has breached the terms and conditions of its contract. It is not worthy of the contract that it has been offered, and unless there are dramatic improvements in the near future, the Minister should take serious steps against First Great Western.

 [Column 465WH](#)

 10.16am

Alison Seabeck >

(Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab)

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I welcome the opportunity that the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) has offered us to debate further the failings of First Great Western. I am also grateful to him because I am now much wiser about the timetable into and out of Didcot.

Recent publicity has been about services not to Didcot, but to the Bristol and Bath areas, where serious problems continue. There are also ongoing problems in the far south-west, which is wholly dependent on good rail services for its interconnectivity with other parts of the UK.

In a recent debate in another place, Lord Davies of Oldham did not try to defend First Great Western's performance record, because it is clearly a cause of deep concern. However, he studiously avoided clarifying whether the Department for Transport as well as First Great Western has a responsibility for the chaos. The Government have invested unprecedented amounts of money in the rail system, particularly in improving safety, and for that they should be applauded. That investment has made the network more reliable, but it has increased the use of

the train as a preferred travel option. Many people also rightly use trains to avoid using cars and planes. However, the network has been unable to cope with the increase in capacity, and overcrowding on lines from Plymouth and Bristol to destinations in the north and east has reached unacceptable levels.

The problem is exacerbated by cuts in rolling stock. As the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) pointed out, stock has been placed in warm storage to save costs—trains have been cut in half to save money. I am advised that leasing a carriage costs roughly what it cost to build one in the 1980s, so someone is making a nice profit. I am sure that the Minister is closely examining how rolling stock leasing companies operate.

The real problem can be traced to the way in which the franchise was first awarded. I understand that to secure the bid, First Great Western committed a premium payment to the Government of about £1.3 billion over the 10-year period of the franchise. When one considers that the Government paid rail operators about £100 million to £200 million in 2005-06 for the services that the First Great Western franchise offers, one sees the scale of the financial turnaround that the company has to achieve. It can make savings only through higher fares, and we have certainly had those—fares have increased by 12 per cent.—or by reducing the number of trains, which it has done, too.

The difficulties are exacerbated by a backlog of work in First Great Western's maintenance department, as hon. Members have already described. Add to that the way in which the timetable was changed against the wishes and the advice of a range of people who are experts in the field and it becomes clear that First Great Western's job of meeting public expectations is almost impossible.

Plymouth city council wrote a long—seven pages—letter to the company in November 2006, flagging up a range of issues. It said:

“The City Council is...aware that some existing incumbent TOCs do not accurately or reliably collect revenue. If such inaccuracy of recording is ultimately used to develop origin and destination trends, and therefore specify service levels, such a process could inaccurately reflect actual travel patterns and demand. Such poor data recording does nothing to help support the case for additional or retention of existing service levels.”

The company has overstretched itself, but if inaccurate data were used during the franchise process, that is clearly worrying.

I am also worried about the way in which the Department for Transport engaged in the franchise process. Did it consider such issues? Was it solely interested in saving money and did it therefore turn a blind eye to the long-term implications for the travelling public in the south-west? Was First Great Western simply being wholly unrealistic? I am not clear where the blame lies, and other hon. Members here today are also confused. I would welcome the opportunity for a round-table discussion with all parties involved in order to get to the bottom of the matter.

There have been calls for First Great Western to be stripped of its franchise in the same way that Connex—with which I am very familiar, having struggled to work on its service for many years—was stripped of its franchise about five years ago. That may be an option, but the Department for Transport must also be open and honest about its part in the matter, not least because we want to avoid a further debacle when the franchise is awarded for the cross-country service. There is

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widespread public concern about interconnectivity between the cross-country franchise and the greater western franchise. The Minister will know about that because I have already written to him on the subject.

Failures in recent weeks have been well documented and reported in the media, culminating in a very public protest by passengers exercising their power over what is clearly an unsatisfactory service. Knee-jerk reactions from First Great Western, such as transferring stock from rural routes in Cornwall to deal with hazardous overcrowding in the Bristol area, are merely short-term solutions, and surely questions must be asked about how the current inadequate service levels were drawn up and agreed.

Julia Goldsworthy >

(Falmouth and Camborne) (LD)

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One of the reassurances we were given during the bid process was that difficulties with rolling stock that resulted in reductions in carriage numbers on branch lines during the busiest time of year would be resolved. We are now seeing such problems extending throughout the year. Does the hon. Lady agree that something needs to be done?

Alison Seabeck >

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Yes, I wholly agree with the hon. Lady. She will agree, I am sure, that hitting the remote ends of the network because they seem like an easy place to make cuts—if there is such a thing—and trying to consolidate the service in the busier centre is deeply damaging to the objective 1 area that she represents.

This situation cannot continue and I would welcome an all-party, round-table discussion with all the key players, with a focus on gaining a better understanding of rail user requirements and consulting other agencies and local authorities on how to achieve customer satisfaction, balanced against getting maximum value for the resources available. There must also be far greater transparency in the franchising process.

 [Column 467WH](#)

 10.22am

Mr. Don Foster >

(Bath) (LD)

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I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) on securing the debate, and I thank him for his honesty in his reference to the botched privatisation, which drew attention to failures of the previous Government that added, in part, to some of the current problems.

In July 2000, when the Deputy Prime Minister was in charge of the railways, he said that


“we shall deliver a railway system that is better for the passengers, better for freight, better for the economy and better for the environment”.—[*Official Report, 20 July 2000; Vol. 354, c. 550.*]

Sadly, he and the Government have failed to deliver on that pledge. Railway services in the south-west are simply not fit for purpose. So great is the anger of people in the Bath and Bristol area, to which the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Kerry McCarthy) referred, that thousands of rail commuters, including many of my constituents, took part in a fare strike. Although I cannot

condone the breaking of the law, I fully sympathise with the anger that my constituents and many in the area have about the appalling services being delivered by the Government and First Great Western.

Roger Berry >

(Kingswood) (Lab)

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The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, according to First Great Western, rail passenger numbers have increased by 41 per cent. in the Bristol area, but it cut the service in December. Does he accept that those of us in the Bristol area appreciate the difficulties that that poses for our constituents, as well as his constituents in Bath?

Mr. Foster >

 [Share](#)

I do indeed, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

It may interest hon. Members to know what was written on the ticket handed out at the protest on Monday. The rail company was described as “First Late Western”. The class was described as “cattle truck”, the ticket type, “standing only”, the route, “hell and back”, and the price, “up 12 per cent.” In a sense, that sums up the issues of real concern to my constituents and others in the wider area. That protest, organised excellently by More Train, Less Strain, brought real concerns to the fore.

People’s concerns fall into four categories. They are concerned by the inadequacies of the timetable, which no longer meets the working patterns of many who wish to commute by rail. They are also concerned about the inadequacy of the number of carriages. We are told by First Great Western that it needs 94 carriages per day to operate the commuter services—what we used to know as the Wessex trains—and, indeed, until Monday, it did not have that full number running on any one day. We have been assured that we will get that full number, but as has already been pointed out, even if a full complement is run, fewer carriages are operating than used to. There is also the question of where those carriages come from—it is quite amazing simply to look at the signage on them.

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There are deep concerns about excessive delays and cancellations and at the height of all those concerns, ludicrous fare increases were imposed. The fare from Bath to London on the high-speed train is one of the highest priced train journeys per mile in the entire world. Many of my constituents have suffered in massively overcrowded carriages and many have not even been able to get on to the trains.

We have heard about passengers, but in fairness, I should point out that many of the staff working for First Great Western are equally concerned about what has happened. A letter sent to my local paper by a ticket officer who, unsurprisingly, wanted to remain anonymous, read:

“The person selling you your ticket is appalled at the price and embarrassed about the service.

We’ve voiced our opinions repeatedly, to no avail. We’re on your side, so please, please, don’t take it out on us.”

He went on to point out that no one gets admonished for arriving late at work at First Great Western because very few of those who now work there travel to work by train. Another anonymous letter was sent by a train driver, who wrote:

“Like all the others at the moment, I am appalled at what is happening with the ‘service’ we are supposed to be providing for our customers... reduced services, lack of units, late running or just plain cancellations of services”.

The staff are appalled about the level of service as well.

The Government must take some of the blame. Over a year ago, I wrote to them detailing my concerns about the planned new timetable, and I received a letter on 9 August from the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), about Keynsham and Oldfield Park, and another letter on 13 September relating to Freshford. I had written to him expressing concern about a reduction in the frequency of trains to those stations. I got a letter referring me to table 6.112 of the franchise stakeholder consultation. My attention was drawn to the fact that the table clearly states the intention to retain an hourly frequency at both stations, and that there would also be additional hourly calls, giving two trains an hour at the stations concerned during peak periods. Those promises from the Government were not delivered. Those trains do not exist and there are greater gaps at those stations than were promised.

As I said earlier, rail services in the south-west are simply not fit for purpose, and the Government must take some of the blame for that. The hon. Member for Wantage is right to say that the buck passing has to stop. I join him and all hon. Members who have spoken in urging the Minister to agree to a meeting that will bring First Great Western, the Government and concerned Members of Parliament into one room, in which we will stay until we have sorted the matter out.

🕒 10.29am

Steve Webb >

(Northavon) (LD)

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I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) both on securing this debate and on the measured and fair way in which he put his argument. Given the amount of anger among our constituents, to which we have all been exposed, that was quite an achievement.

The hon. Gentleman started by saying that there was a lot of buck passing going on. I absolutely agree with him. Everyone blames somebody else. We should not try to point the finger today, but work out where we should go from here to sort the problem out. Let me give one example of the buck passing. I had a meeting with the regional manager of First Great Western in my area and the cross-Bristol franchise, to which a number of hon. Members have referred. We all know that there have been problems with maintenance. As the hon. Member for Bristol, East (Kerry McCarthy) said, we are told that the maintenance depot at St. Philip’s Marsh is not ready yet, and that neither is the stock that was taken over from the Wessex franchise, which my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) mentioned.

I note in this week’s edition of *Rail* magazine, however, which I am sure hon. Members read regularly, that Arriva Trains Wales was outraged by that suggestion. The managing director said:

“It is an outrageous suggestion and...utter rubbish. I have had no complaints about the quality or the delivery of their fleet.

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We provided full availability every day in the weeks leading up to December 10.”

So why did the rolling stock that Wessex and the Welsh services were able to run reliably right up to 10 December suddenly become so unreliable? That does not add up. Again, the buck passing is not achieving anything.

The right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), speaking with the authority of a former Cabinet Minister, quite properly said that both First Great Western and the Department for Transport need to learn lessons. The issue is not just about party political point scoring; the Department must take some responsibility. I fully accept that there have been management failures, as the hon. Member for Bristol, East said, but the way in which the Department has handled the franchise is a source of concern. The Minister wrote to me about those issues on 16 January, saying:

“I am determined that appropriate action is taken to ensure that the performance of these train services improves.”

However, I am not quite sure what that action is or has been. I hope that he will tell us not simply that the service is not good enough and that he wants it to be better, but what his Department is doing to put things right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey raised the key issue of capacity and referred to carriages being in warm storage. One point that has not been made so far is that if First Great Western provides a service of sorts, with too few carriages, it will not necessarily fail on either its cancellation or punctuality targets. In other words, provided that the train is there with at least one carriage, the operator does not trigger either of those penalties, which would mean having to give season ticket discounts or refunds. It is therefore better financially to run such services short, with all the chaos that we have heard about.

Mr. Colin Breed >

(South-East Cornwall) (LD)



Does my hon. Friend also condemn the warm storage of our coaches down in Cornwall, which are taken away from us and passed up to Bristol and Bath to try to fix the problem there? All my constituents and many others in Cornwall have been consigned to buses, instead of having any carriages whatever.

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Steve Webb >



I can well understand the anger of my hon. Friend’s constituents about that situation. The hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson) talked about robbing Peter to pay Paul. That is not a solution, although my constituents are grateful for the loan.

We have heard about the issue of the carriages and short formation. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck) made a good point, in a good contribution, about the franchise and the profits that the rolling stock companies are making. The current structure was set up by successive Governments, but my sense about the rail industry is that the rolling stock companies are, for want of a better phrase, rolling in it. A letter was sent to me in November by a customer service adviser for First Great Western, who said that

“there are simply not the carriages available”.

I just do not believe that. I suspect strongly that the carriages are available, but at a price, and that it might just not be possible to get them—other than from Cornwall, obviously—within the profit targets that First Great Western has set itself.

The hon. Lady asked a good question, however. There might be analogy, albeit a distant one, with the 3G auction of the mobile spectrum. Huge amounts of money were raised and everyone said how clever the idea was. The Government got lots of cash, but it subsequently became apparent that too much had probably been paid. Although the businesses thought that they had got a good deal, it turned out that they had not. There have been knock-on effects for the industry. I wonder whether too much was paid for the franchise, whether First Great Western was capable of delivering the services that we need, and whether those services were specified to a high enough level. I met the regional manager of First Great Western for the Greater Bristol area and the hon. Lady's area, who said that the specification was the most basic one possible by the Strategic Rail Authority. Our constituents deserve more than the most basic possible specification of timetables and frequency. The rhetoric about public transport—about modal shift, getting people out of their cars and so on—is used all the time, but the reality is that the Government try to get away with the minimum possible service. That is not good enough.

We have heard many horror stories, which I shall not repeat. However, to cite a further example, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) has described a litany of problems, saying that passengers, luggage and even a wheelchair-bound passenger were packed in so tight that the guard could not get on until some of the passengers had got off. That is a complete farce. To be told then that it is safer to have people packed on than having just a few people standing is nonsense. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) pointed out that there are rules for the overcrowding of cattle, but not for that of humans. That is a telling point, and action needs to be taken.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath rightly highlighted the fact that many of the people who work for First Great Western are as demoralised as our constituents are, and we all agreed with him on that. We do not want to take out our anger on the people who work for First Great Western. I have heard directly from many people who work for the company. People love the railways—they work on them because they want to provide a superb service. They are as frustrated as anybody with the rubbish that we have now.

My hon. Friend highlighted the four key areas, including the inadequacies of the timetable. We have heard about the problems in peak time—in Didcot, in Romsey and in areas in other constituencies—which is the key time when we can get traffic off the roads. To give a parochial example, hundreds of people make the journey between Yate, which is a major town of in my constituency, and Filton Abbey Wood, which is a major employer in my constituency, as part of the Ministry of Defence. There are rail stations at the start and at the end of the journey, but lots of people drive, because they cannot rely on the trains. That is madness. I hope that the summit meeting that the hon. Member for Wantage talked about, and in which I would be happy to take part, brings the issue to a head. If all that we and our constituents have gone through in the past few weeks leads to action to get a grip on the situation, everything might not have been in vain, because action is urgently needed.

On railways policy, I have a concern about the length of the franchises that are awarded. In a debate about the failures of First Great Western, it might seem perverse to talk about longer franchises—many people would think that seven days was too long, let alone seven years. However, when franchises are awarded, do companies think that they are in it for the long haul?

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Do they have an incentive to buy the rolling stock rather than lease it? Longer franchises—of course with regular performance reviews, but with the fundamental assumption that a company that does a damn good job is in there for the long haul—would give the industry the stability that we all want. There should be a presumption of, funnily enough, longer franchises with proper scrutiny. The Liberal Democrats want serious action on train leasing and on the profits that the rolling stock companies are making, because there is a domino effect. The cost of leasing is exorbitant, so the companies do not lease, the service is not good enough and we are where we are today.

Call it blame or responsibility, but the focus in many quarters must be on how we tackle the problems that have arisen throughout the network and which should have been foreseen by both the operating companies and the Government.

🕒 10.38am

Stephen Hammond >

(Wimbledon) (Con)

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Like so many other hon. Members before me, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) not only on securing this debate, but on his eloquent advocacy on behalf of his constituents. That has been a feature of this debate—I was going to name all hon. Members who had spoken, but I have counted 17 contributions or interventions so far. That shows the strength of feeling about the franchise.

We had two debates on the same subject in the Chamber last year, one initiated by the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) and the other by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). In March last year I visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabek) and other parts of the area to listen to the problems of local commuters and to discuss the issues with First Great Western management.

What has happened has not been a surprise. This debate is important on two levels. First, the service that the train users receive from First Great Western, as operated by First Group, is not satisfactory. In fact, it is so far from satisfactory that it is, to use the currently immortal phrase, not fit for purpose. However, on another level the debate is clearly about some of the key problems of the rail industry, including how it is structured. The hon. Member for Northavon (Steve Webb) mentioned the length of franchises; other problems include the level of Government intervention and how the franchising is being tendered.

Transport 2000, an independent group, has stated that rail use in the south-west and west has grown by 42 per cent. in the past decade. Yet it goes on to say that despite that categorical evidence of passenger demand, in December 2006 in the finalised timetable

“the Department for Transport’s rail group cut back rail services, taking away 32 rail carriages and with it thousands of rail passenger seats.”

During his excellent contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage said that people are extremely angry and are paying huge prices for an abominable service. He outlined the litany of performance failures. I can only say that on behalf of my constituents and myself, I am glad that I do not travel on the Didcot service. We talk about journey times decreasing; it seems extraordinary that there has been a 20-minute increase in the time that the service takes. That

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was cited by “The Thunderer” on Monday, the day of action. For those who do not read *The Times*, I should explain that “The Thunderer” is a columnist who on Monday pointed out the problems not only of delays, but of overcrowding. He specifically mentioned Oldfield Park station, where commuters had difficulty getting on the train. That underlines the consensus of feeling, which is evident not only from hon. Members here today and from “The Thunderer” in *The Times*. Gerry Doherty of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association union said on Monday, the day of the strike:

“Passengers have had enough of paying sky-high prices for appalling services”.

This debate has shown a clear consensus: First Great Western is not providing the service that it should. Inevitably, as predicted by Members in their letters to the Minister and by Transport 2000 and others, we are seeing overcrowding and transference away from trains across the whole area. The service being provided is in direct contrast to the needs of the commuting public and the long-distance traveller.

Mr. Rob Wilson >

[Share](#)

Does my hon. Friend think it fair or just that my constituents now have to pay £3,176 for an annual standard class ticket from Reading station in my constituency to Paddington? That is nearly £6,000 of earned income; a lot of sweat goes into earning that much money, which pays for a standard-class ticket to stand for 30 minutes on journeys to and from Paddington.

Stephen Hammond >

[Share](#)

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I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that the senior civil servant who said that standing was acceptable will be regretting his remarks. Rail commuters from Reading may well want to hold him up as one of the villains of the piece.

I want to talk about long-distance as well as commuting issues, as considerable wider west and south-west needs are also involved. The corridor from the south coast to Bristol and Wales links some of the major urban settlements. Particular problems in Greater Bristol, Bath, Wiltshire and south Wales, and the line from London to the south-west peninsula, have been mentioned. The regional spatial strategy and regional economic strategy highlight those as areas of housing and economic growth. The timetabling for those areas has resulted in cuts in service, shorter and less frequent trains starting later in the morning, and longer dwell times—in complete contrast and opposition to the regional economic strategy.

This debate has shown that the plight of all travellers using Great Western since the imposition of the new timetable is simply not acceptable. No one in the Chamber is an apologist for First Group, whose performance has remained inadequate and whose punctuality remains appalling. It needs to spend money—and not a little—on taking urgent action to clear its maintenance backlog. The issue is not only that the prescribed timetable took out some of the carriages, but the huge problem of maintenance. I hear what has been said about targets, but clearing that backlog would do a lot to increase punctuality, reliability and commuter satisfaction.

First Group, in extensive negotiations with the Government, has restored one commuter service since December. It needs to restore more morning rush-hour trains and to increase the evening peak service. First Group will be listening to this debate; the message is that all those things should be done as a matter not of urgency, but of necessity.

Several Members have said that they do not want to get too involved in the blame game. As I said, First Group needs to make substantial improvements. Given what the Minister has heard from across the Chamber, he must be in no doubt that Members are clear about why the service is so poor: the problems are due principally to the Department for Transport and the prescribed franchise that it imposed on First Group. Some understanding of whom should be mentioned in the blame game is important for understanding the problems not only on this part of the network, but on the network as a whole.

It is true that the Government specified the First Group timetable that has reduced services and led to carriages being withdrawn, and that they extracted the premium from First Group that has forced fare increases. I am sure that the Minister will denounce rail privatisation, forgetting that his party has been in charge of the railways for 10 years and that usage has increased. He will remind us that he has had his brief for only four months and that the franchise re-letting took place before that.

I have had the pleasure of sparring with the Minister on transport issues since he has come to the Front Bench and I know him to be one of the good guys. However, he is a representative of the Government, who cannot escape our criticism and questioning. Our debate has proved that the villains of the piece are not only First Group, but the Government.

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The Minister needs to answer a number of problems that underline not only the issues that have been highlighted today, but those for other franchises. How many civil servants in his Department are now writing timetables? How many timetables were included in the invitation to tender for the First Great Western franchise? Which franchise was chosen? Will he confirm that the Government minimum specification was involved, that the Government continue to use that process to deliver franchises, that the specified timetable reduced services and that the timetable specified the length of trains and the number of carriages to be used?

Will the Minister also confirm that between 1 April and 1 December last year, when the finalised timetable was put forward, First Group made numerous representations to the Government, seeking to alter the timetable, and that First Group has gone beyond the minimum timetable specified? Does he agree with Transport 2000's comment in its publication "Growing the Railways" that the Government imposed a timetable and train leasing framework that involved fewer trains? Will he confirm that the timetable took 32 carriages out of service?

As I said earlier, no one here wants to be an apologist for First Group; its performance and service are unacceptable. However, the Government wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage saying:

"I consider a reasonable balance has been struck in the level and structure of provision of train services from Didcot Parkway."

Given this debate, the Minister will surely want to recognise that that statement was at least a little early in the making. Will he reconsider it? This debate has highlighted First Great Western service issues and a number of issues in the railway system; overcrowding is easily recognised by my constituents on the South West Trains franchise from Raynes Park and Wimbledon. One of my constituents recently wrote to me about a 47 per cent. increase in fares on the Thameslink line. The Government's micromanagement of the railways is failing.

Let us finish the debate in the same way as it has taken place, by accepting that there is blame on both parties. Even if the Minister cannot answer all my other questions, perhaps he will answer this one: having heard the speeches of the 15 to 20 hon. Members in the Chamber, will he guarantee to get the Members who have spoken on behalf of their constituents, the Department and the management of First Great Western into a room to rectify some of the timetable chaos and problems that result in human misery for the commuters who are the constituents of so many hon. Members here today? Will he agree to do that as a matter of urgency?

🕒 10.50am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport >

(Mr. Tom Harris)

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I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey). He has received many congratulations this morning; I do not expect to be the same position by the time I sit down.

I am sure that my civil servants will understand why, given the intensity of the feeling in the debate, I shall abandon my prepared comments and try to deal directly with as many comments as possible. I begin by pointing out that although I am the Minister for rail, and possibly, these days, the Minister for Westminster Hall, I am not the Minister for First Great Western. The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) said at the end of his comments that no one in this room would be an apologist for First Great Western, and he was accurate in that respect. I do not intend to be an apologist for First Great Western; it is not down to me to defend the unacceptable level of service that First Great Western has provided to its customers over the past few weeks.

First, I shall refer directly to the comments of the hon. Member for Wantage. He asked for more clarification and transparency in the franchising process. I can tell him and the Chamber that the invitation to tender for the greater western franchise will be published shortly, although I do not know in what form it will be published at the moment. However, it will be published and available for public inspection.

Talking about the First Great Western franchise, the most recent edition of *Private Eye* states that the other problem

“is a savage cut in the number of carriages FGW leases so that they can sit out of use in sidings —at the government’s command.”

The hon. Gentleman referred also to Christian Wolmar’s article in yesterday’s *Evening Standard*, where he said:

“The number of coaches leased by the company had to be cut from more than 130 to 112, forcing many services to be run with fewer carriages or be cancelled altogether.”

I am grateful for the opportunity to set the record straight. The Government have never and will never specify the number of carriages to be used in the First Great Western franchise or in any other franchise in the United Kingdom.

The responsibility for providing carriages for the services lies entirely with First Great Western and I have spoken on a number of occasions to Moir Lockhead, the chief executive of First Group, who has assured me that he will shortly issue a public apology that explicitly states that stories

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that have appeared in the press that suggest that the Government have anything to do with the number of carriages used in the First Great Western franchise are completely erroneous. Given the gullibility of some members of the media, it proves that a lie repeated often enough becomes received wisdom. I hope that that is clarification enough, because many Members raised that point and I wanted to put it clearly on the record—

Sandra Gidley >

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Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Harris >

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I have seven minutes left to cover one and a half hours of intense debate. I hope that the hon. Lady, who has already made a speech, will forgive me but I do not want to give way. If I do that and do not get round everybody I could justifiably be criticised, and so I apologise.

The hon. Member for Wantage described it as “plainly silly” for the Department for Transport to try to micro-manage franchises. I totally agree with him, and that is why we do not. The hon. Member for Wimbledon asked how many civil servants are employed by the DFT to write timetables; he does not need to table a written question on that, because the answer is none.

Stephen Hammond >

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Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Harris >

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I am not going to give way.

Stephen Hammond >

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On a point of information, then?

Mr. Harris >

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There is no such thing as a point of information.

Stephen Hammond >

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On a point of order, Mr. Atkinson. I hear what the Minister has said, but he replied to a parliamentary question to confirm that there are 15 civil servants in his Department.

Mr. Peter Atkinson >

(in the Chair)

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Order. That is not a point of order.

Mr. Harris >

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There are far more than that number of civil servants in my Department, but none of them is tasked with writing timetables. That is a matter for train operating companies in partnership with Network Rail.

The hon. Member for Wantage referred to Labour criticisms of the “botched privatisation” of the Conservative Government. I do not know if I heard him correctly—perhaps he could confirm this from a sedentary position—but he described what happened under the Railways Act 2005 as a “botched nationalisation”.

Mr. Vaizey >

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indicated assent.

Mr. Harris >

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The railways are not nationalised; they are in the private sector. The railways are provided by the private sector as specified by the Government, and that is exactly the structure that will work in the long term. In response to his request for a summit meeting, given that First Great Western has now gone on the record to accept culpability for the disastrous performance of the past few weeks, I do not at the moment see a need for any kind of summit that involves First Great Western, local MPs and the Department for Transport. Of course, I shall keep that under review but given what First Great Western has said and what I have repeated, I am not sure why the hon. Gentleman wants to sit in my office and listen to Moir Lockhead say exactly the same as he is about to say publicly.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) asked that the Department’s monitoring of the franchise should be made public. I reassure him that the public performance measure, which measures the performance of all the train operating companies in four-week sections over the year, is made public and published on the Network Rail website.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) talked about the timetable and the minimum specification. Once again, she will be glad to know that the invitation to tender will be published shortly by the Department. She said that First Great Western cannot afford the premium payments. Once again, a myth is starting to spread throughout the industry about premium payments and their knock-on effect on the service. A number of years ago, the railway industry was a basket case and individual franchises would never have considered paying a premium to the DFT for the privilege of running services. Now we have private companies paying money back into the public purse, and I would have thought that she would have welcomed that. The fact is that there has never been a question mark over First Great Western’s ability to pay the premium to which it is committed under the franchise. There is no question that that payment will not be made or that it cannot afford it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about carriage shortages. She will be glad to know that First Great Western is about to issue an apology and explanation for what has happened on the railway. She asked about the additional units. I understand that First Great Western has provided additional units for the franchise from its TransPennine Express franchise. Although that was originally intended as a temporary measure, I am told that those units are there to stay, which will have a knock-on beneficial effect on the rest of the franchise.

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The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Benyon) banged the drum of his party about prescribed timetables. He was disappointed, as was his hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon, that we do not write timetables. He talked—and was absolutely correct—about the wider social impact on families. I understand the frustration of passengers using the franchise and sympathise with any family that has to suffer the inconvenience and stress of family members returning home from their journey so late that they cannot interact properly with their family. That has to be addressed and I hope that it will be addressed by First Great Western.

The hon. Member for Newbury also talked about inflation-busting fares increases. The hon. Member for Wimbledon agreed that fare increases above inflation are unacceptable. In the minute that I have left, I want to plead with the hon. Gentleman as the spokesman for his party: is he saying that capacity can be increased by x amount and that we can reduce fares at the same time—

Stephen Hammond >

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indicated dissent.

Mr. Harris >

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The hon. Gentleman agreed that the price of a season ticket was too high. The Conservative party has to be realistic. It is unrealistic to say that capacity can be increased, fares can be reduced and taxes can be reduced at the same time. It is simply not credible. If we are to have a serious debate, it will have to be on a higher level than simply scoring political points on such an important issue.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) said that the franchises—

Mr. Peter Atkinson >

(in the Chair)

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Order. We must move on.